

# TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MANOA IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
IN ART

APRIL 2018

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## Introduction:

The focus of my research is an examination of the daily lives of South Asian women, specifically in my home city of Karachi, Pakistan. Within my art practice, I draw from my experiences of how I inhabit public and private spaces and rely on research from other South Asian scholars interested in gender, urban space and the women's right in everyday life. Much of my investigation has been on how upper middle-class women in Pakistan navigate public spaces in its metropolitan cities. My research into how gender is interwoven with demarcations between and connotations of public and private spaces has led me to deeply examine what private spaces and boundaries mean to women for whom unconditional access to public spaces is still a fantasy. I examine how the line dividing inside and outside is drawn, and observe what modes of dress, activity, visibility, and sociality are delineated to each sphere. In this exhibition I investigate "phenomenal boundaries"; a term coined by sociologist Bridget Purcell, that is, the boundary not as "real"<sup>1</sup>, but as experienced and constituted (or not) by its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> My aim is to think about place from the lens of

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<sup>1</sup> in my paper, the real boundary refers to physical walls and objects demarcating space, while imagined boundaries refers to social mannerisms we are conditioned to perform in order to create a boundary between our self and our surroundings.

<sup>2</sup> Purcell, Bridget. "The House Unbound: Refiguring Gender and Domestic Boundaries in Urbanizing Southeast Turkey." *American Anthropological Association*, vol. 29, no. 1, Apr. 2017, pp. 14-34., [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ciso.12110/full](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ciso.12110/full).

gender and discuss phenomenal boundaries women create in order to feel safer in public spaces, as well as the phenomenal boundaries in the form of fear that women experience when they step into a public place. Examining my relationship with place has led me to a deeper and more expansive definition of boundaries as constraining, or safe, and sometimes both at the same time.

The “place” of muslim women in the Islamic world, their issues of mobility and visibility, are a dense point of political and anthropological discussion today.

However, as many scholars have pointed out, most of these studies invariably see women from the eastern world, as the oppressed other in need of liberation.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the many reasons why I find it important to discuss my personal experiences regarding these issues as a woman living in an Islamic, South Asian country. In the installation, *Transgressing Boundaries* I present my perspective as a upper middle class woman living in Pakistan, negotiating the boundaries of fear, of limited access to public space, and within the private spaces of home. My work draws out how I, and

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<sup>3</sup> Lughod, Lila Abu. *Do muslim really need saving?* 2013.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Guindi, Fadwa El. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. New York: Berg, 1999. Print.

many other women around me, actively engage and negotiate for space and power.

One of the ways of doing this is by using the very same boundaries and constraints to empower space for ourselves in the patriarchal world. In this installation, I reflect on the idea of boundaries by curating a private space, built with separators, the ritual of Rangoli, and illustrations of myself. I create a private space that is safe and yet constraining, active and yet passive; a space that maintains boundaries while simultaneously transgressing them.

*Transgressing boundaries* provokes the viewer to think about the phenomenal boundaries women experience in their everyday life. The installation reflects on how women transgress and negotiate phenomenal boundaries to claim agency while also exploring how the many phenomenal boundaries women create to access public space, are in fact fragile and can easily be disrupted. As well as reflecting on the labor women invest in maintaining certain boundaries, and disrupting others.

## **Navigating the Installation, Transgressing Boundaries**

*Transgressing boundaries* takes shape through the convergence of a large scale drawing (125" by 192" inch ) hung on the gallery walls with figures suspended in a void (see figure 4), surrounded by 15, (125" by 25" each ) screen printed translucent paper hung from the ceiling acting as separators (see figure 2). These elements are further enclosed by a house plan (150" by 200") ( see figure 2 and 9), made from white plastic pellets acting as rice, in the tradition of Rangoli (which I will discuss in the body of the paper). The floor plan serves to symbolize outside/inside, public/private within the gallery space. This floor drawing demarcates access to certain sections of the floor while deeming other places inaccessible. Because of it's large scale and graphic quality, the large ink drawing on the wall might be the first thing the viewer notices, even though it is surrounded and blocked in sections by the separators and Rangoli the viewer must physically negotiate the space to view the work (see figure 2 and 3). The installation is designed to create a space, where there are not firm barriers and yet the audience experiences a site of boundaries, and limitations and does not have the freedom to fully engage with space of the gallery.

## **Framing hair: Braid, Tangle, Coil**

In everyday practice, it is the body that becomes the point of action through which people experience their surroundings. The body is not only a physical entity, but also a culturally constructed notion. Gendered bodies are (re)produced by particular socio-spatial conditions, e.g. one that naturalize the use of public space by men while identifying women with the space of home.<sup>4</sup> Actions performed in any spatial setting resonates with the prevailing gender boundaries, crossing the boundary means changing or threatening the social order. The patriarchal culture in Pakistan has placed women within the realm of domestic life or narrowly defined work roles. Within my work I use multiples of my body to project how the social constructed boundaries constrains the way the physical body is conceived. The ghostly figures in my work are active and free, yet constrained by yards of long braided hair. The figures in the installation, are merely outlines, unable to claim/fill space with full autonomy (see figure 6).

Hair universally, but particularly in South Asia, marks a person as clearly as speech and clothing. Hair - whether present or absent, long or short, bound or unbound.... defines a person's gender, age, social status and even political stance. Different

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<sup>4</sup> Habib, Kishwar, et al. "(Un)Covering the Face of Dhaka: Gender Politics and Public Space in the Post-Colonial City." *Environment, Space, Place*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 69-98.



interpretations include hair as a key aspect of feminine beauty, virility, as obscene, impure, and linked with other symbolic markers in bodily, social political constructs.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally in South Asian culture, untamed open hair is associated with loose sexual behavior, as well as menstruating women.<sup>6</sup> People who display loose hair in public, therefore, appear to have suspended- for a variety of reasons with a variety of consequences- their normal assigned roles in public.<sup>7</sup> In contrast long, thick braided hair is associated with womanhood and domesticity.

In the installation, I reference the iconic middle class Indian woman with braided hair with in my work; here the braids, become a sign of restrictions placed on women, not only by society but by their loved ones, and often unknowingly by themselves.

In the painting hung on the wall, three of the women are completely entrapped by their braids, while another three are bound but also engage with the braids, attempting to coil or contain them. The seventh figure crawls away from the rest, while her braid ensnares the other women (see figure 4). In my work, hair then

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<sup>5</sup> Hildebeitel, Alf., and Miller, Barbara D. "Hair : Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures." *Hair : Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, Barbara. "Understanding Hair Messages." *The Indian Express*, 5 Dec. 2015, indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/understanding-hair-messages/.

<sup>7</sup> Hildebeitel, Alf., and Miller, Barbara D. "Hair : Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures." *Hair : Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, 1998.

represents the societal restrictions that are ingrained within women since their childhood. The weight of these restrictions eventually become a part of their identity. In *Transgressing boundaries*, within this private space of freedom and constraint, the braid personifies phenomenal boundaries, restricting the movement of the women to varying degrees.

In a case study on Nepalese women, anthropologist Hildebeitel found that younger women are forced to grow their hair as they reach a marriageable age. In order to conform to the Hindu ideals of adult femininity, in her book she talks about two different women and how they negotiate with this restriction placed upon them.

"Jamuna wore her hair just to the bottom of her ears, and she wore it unstyled and disheveled. For Jamuna, as she once told me amid conversation about feminism in Kathmandu, this was a conscious lack of effort...In doing so Jamuna overtly rejected the associations of long hair and ornamentation with older Hindu ideals of adult femininity. Jamuna's radical politics in a sense was inscribed on her body in her lack of conformity. Instead she had self consciously taken her cues on what western feminism looked like.... However sometimes women had hairstyles that did not match their internal identity - wearing long hair could detract from associating the wearer with more radical set of beliefs. One of Jamuna's friend, Bharati, had very long straight hair, she braided in fancy ways and put it in variety of coils and buns.... While Bharati

may have looked conservative...she was actually considered very radical in her political beliefs and activities. Bhartai's more conservative appearance, actually gave her some amount of respectability in the social world, which then allowed her to be more radical in her actions.<sup>8</sup>

Within the installation, I draw myself handling, coiling and negotiating with my hair. Much like Bharati and Jamuna, my self portraits project an attempt to negotiate with the patriarchal system our bodies are constrained by. Where some of the figures are completely enveloped by the braids, others are handling and coiling the hair, and another figure completely attempting to crawl away from that space. In doing so, highlighting the many ways in which women disrupt socially constructed boundaries, or use them to negotiate their own space.

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<sup>8</sup> Hildebeitel, Alf., and Miller, Barbara D. "Hair : Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures." *Hair : Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, 1998.

**Borders, Boundaries and Space:**

The second component of Transgressing Boundaries is inspired by the South Asian Hindu tradition of Rangoli employing white plastic pellets that resemble rice as a drawing tool, I have laid out a house floor plan on the physical gallery floor. Within floor plan, some areas are rendered inaccessible by the beads, while other areas designed as pathways the audience can walk within.

Rangoli, commonly practiced by South Asian Hindu women, is the creation of colorful symmetrical designs with dye, rice or flowers on the floors of their homes. The intention of the ritual is to create a sacred space and invite positive energy, and to welcome guests and gods on auspicious occasions into their homes. Within my own work, I practice this ritual to demarcate a private space within the gallery.

Due to limitations of the gallery I use rice shaped plastic beads to practice the tradition. In creating this work I was interested in the practice and performance of Rangoli as opposed to the material it is commonly practiced in. This ritual of Rangoli is followed predominantly by women as they are commonly responsible for the purity and maintenance of the household. Rangoli is usually made at the threshold of the house in order to assert that the family within is respectable, reliable .<sup>9</sup> Thus, holding the makers of the Rangoli responsible for the honor of the house and its inhabitants.

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<sup>9</sup> Cartwright, Catherine Jones. Rangoli : Elder Women Creating Sacred Geography . 2002.

In her book *Rangoli : Elder Women Creating Sacred Geography*, Catherine Jones Cartwright states that many women practice Rangoli because they are not able to access larger public places of worship freely and so inturn create a small sacred space for themselves within the home. <sup>10</sup> Cartwrights observation in a sense refutes the limited view of Rangoli simply as “women’s work” and domestic duty. Performing the ritual Rangoli becomes a medium through which women can convert the home into a sacred space that they might not be able to fully access otherwise. Through this ritual, being able to create a sense of belonging and engagement with a place.

The creator of the Rangoli claims autonomy over a selected space, and is in the position of a mediator between those who use the sacred space and the divine presence within that place.<sup>11</sup>

The installation, *Transgressing Boundaries* has a physical presence within the same space as the audience and as such immediately encourages a whole body experience rather than the just visual. I endeavor to make the audience have an embodied experiences of phenomenal boundaries with this work.

When the audience first encounters the installation, they will find that they have to walk to follow a specific route to be able to access and observe the work and can only

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<sup>10</sup>Cartwright, Catherine Jones. *Rangoli : Elder Women Creating Sacred Geography* . 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Cartwright, Catherine Jones. *Rangoli : Elder Women Creating Sacred Geography* . 2002.

access the space with a certain degree of limitation, as some areas are covered with beads and inaccessible. This negotiation with the boundaries of the Rangoli are reflective of the boundaries I experience in my everyday life. My installation is symbolic of the private spaces women create for themselves, to negotiate the larger patriarchal structure.

In a study in Turkey, Bridget Purcell, observed three women in Urfa, Turkey, living alone. She examined the precautions and boundaries they observed in their everyday lives, which ranged from, covering their windows at home, to not answering the door after evening, to wearing a specific type of clothing in public. They created this private space and rules to be able to live and work without any male supervision in the city. Phenomenal boundaries are a symptom of a larger patriarchal structure, and many women observe them to negotiate with the system. In my installation, the Rangoli is an attempt to observe the labor women employ in their every day lives to create a relationship and a sense of belonging to a place. The inaccessible areas within my work represent the phenomenal boundaries women create, where they work with in a institutionalized system to create spaces for themselves.

Since the material being used to make this drawing is fragile and easily altered by movement, I will be coming in to the gallery over a period of time to retain the

drawing. I perform this function of maintaining the space as a reflection of the phenomenal boundaries I create everyday to be able to claim my own space in public. The labour of maintaining these fragile boundaries of the rangoli, mirror the emotional labor women in Karachi tend to invest in order to create a safe space for themselves.

With this installation, I have used the symbol of hair to represent the oppressive system women are subjected to, that have seeped into their bodies and become part of their bodily organs, part of their breath. In contrast the Rangoli, highlights how women in Karachi work within that patriarchal system to create a space for themselves.

### **Boundary Making: Separators**

The third component of Transgressing Boundaries are the separators hanging in groups of three or four within the space demarcated by the Rangoli, they add another layer of boundaries and further divide the installation. These separators represent the curtains or screens used in domestic spaces to divide up the house into smaller private and public spaces. I appropriate that function within my installation, as they reinforce the boundaries of the floor plan. I chose to work with translucent paper because it reminded me of sheer curtains, translucent screens, head scarves and clothing, all different ways to create boundaries are made visible.

Veiling in western discourse is equated with lack of agency. Over the years become a symbol of oppression, where different forms of dress codes for the veil have become one. Lila Abulghod in her book *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* talks about how historically muslim women have used the veil as a way to negotiate space, and move out of segregated households, to access public space while still maintaining their religious belief system. Hana Papanek has described the burqa as "portable seclusion"<sup>12</sup>, where women work within the patriarchal system and maintain social codes, however also negotiate the invisible boundaries to be able to access a larger

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<sup>12</sup>Lughod, Lila Abu. *Do muslim really need saving?* 2013.



space. These separators speak to the phenomenal boundaries women create with their bodies, clothing, screens or other various symbols to construct a private space.

From afar the viewer can observe the islamic geometric patterns screen printed on the separators. However, on closer observation, the patterns are built with hundreds of my self portraits. I have traced the drawing of my body multiple times to create common islamic geometric patterns, ornamenting buildings, textiles, books, paintings and so on. The geometric patterns represent a geographical location, a culture, a religion. The islamic geometric patterns in my work are symbolic of the social norms, rituals, and a way of life. They are representative of a culture and social norms perpetuated over centuries, without change or questioning.

<sup>13</sup>Anila Agha Qayyum, is a contemporary artist interested women's lack of access to public space in Pakistan, particularly places of worship. In her installation called "Intersections", she reflects on how women are generally discouraged from going to mosques and instead are asked to pray at home in Pakistan. For this project, she creates a metal sculpture carved with traditional Islamic patterns borrowed from mosques and creates a sacred space of her own, the sculpture resembles the holy Kaaba in Mecca. This gigantic sculpture floats in mid air and has light illuminating

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<sup>13</sup> refer to figure 4.

from within the box to the outside (see figure 1). Qayyum too references Islamic geometric patterns to refer to a culture and its problems. Qayyum recognizes that she as a woman might not be able to have unconditional access to all mosques, and so she uses the same patterns and visual language to create a sacred space for herself. Within my work, I too illustrate my own body, mimicking the traditional patterns and morph into the traditional structure, but in doing so, I hope to break that pattern.

"Sometimes simply existing within certain spaces as women or minorities, can become acts of transgressions."<sup>14</sup> - Elizabeth Wilson

I am bringing in the same sentiment forward, of fighting and negotiating the boundaries from within the system. Islam traditionally discourages illustrations of the human body and drawing my body can be seen as an act of transgression from an eastern perspective. Here I use this visual act of disrupting a social norm, to narrate stories of women around me who constantly disrupt and transgress boundaries by simply existing in spaces they are discouraged from entering.

My body in these patterns, like the ink drawings, is tangled and constrained by its own hair. However the patterns here narrate a story of women claiming agency, and space

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<sup>14</sup> Bondi, /Liz. "GENDER, CLASS, AND URBAN SPACE: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN LANDSCAPES." *Urban Geography*, 1998

in the system. My body, though constrained by the shape of motif and my own hair, is moving, multiplying and active, and altering the structure while existing within it.

Even though Qayyum, creates a sacred space, that everyone can have access to, she too has designed physical barriers, restraining the viewer from full accessing the space. The audience can only observe her space from afar, similarly with in my work, while the audience can engage with my installation, the separators and the Rangoli prohibit them from full access.

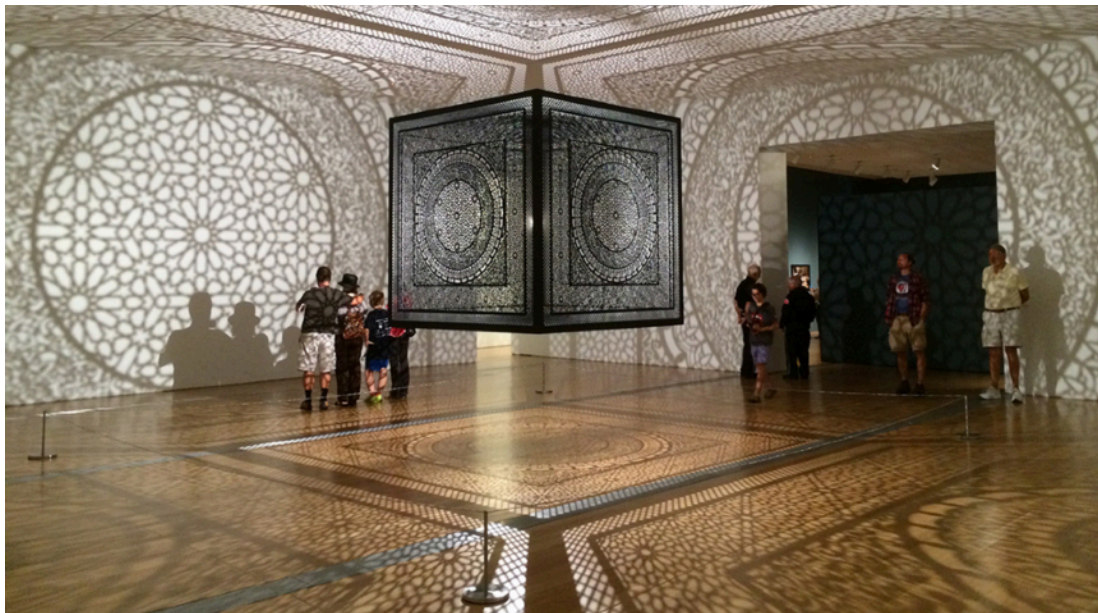
**Conclusion:**

*Transgressing boundaries* provokes the viewer to think about the phenomenal boundaries women experience in their everyday life, drawing inspiration from women's life in Asia. With my work and my personal narrative I am interested in highlighting how women negotiate, transgress and push the boundaries they encounter in every day life. Exploring private spaces that women create to feel safe but can in process also constrain them. I use the symbol of hair, to delve into one of the many ways South Asian society restricts women to specific roles. Representing the restrictions that are placed on women not only by the society, and their loved ones but often unknowingly by themselves. The restrictions, becoming a part of their body, and psyche. The weight of the braid, altering their physical bodies and how they engage with the larger space, the separators too, are reflective of the same restrictions. The performance of Rangoli in my work, is an attempt to highlight the everyday labour that women perform to negotiate access to public spaces, and live on their own terms. The installation and its contents are meant to be agents through which the audience experiences a certain degree of restriction with engaging with a space, reflective of women's experiences in their everyday lives.

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**Anila Qayyum Agha - Intersections**

Figure 1



**Transgressing Boundaries - Installation view**

Figure 2





**Installation View - Full view**

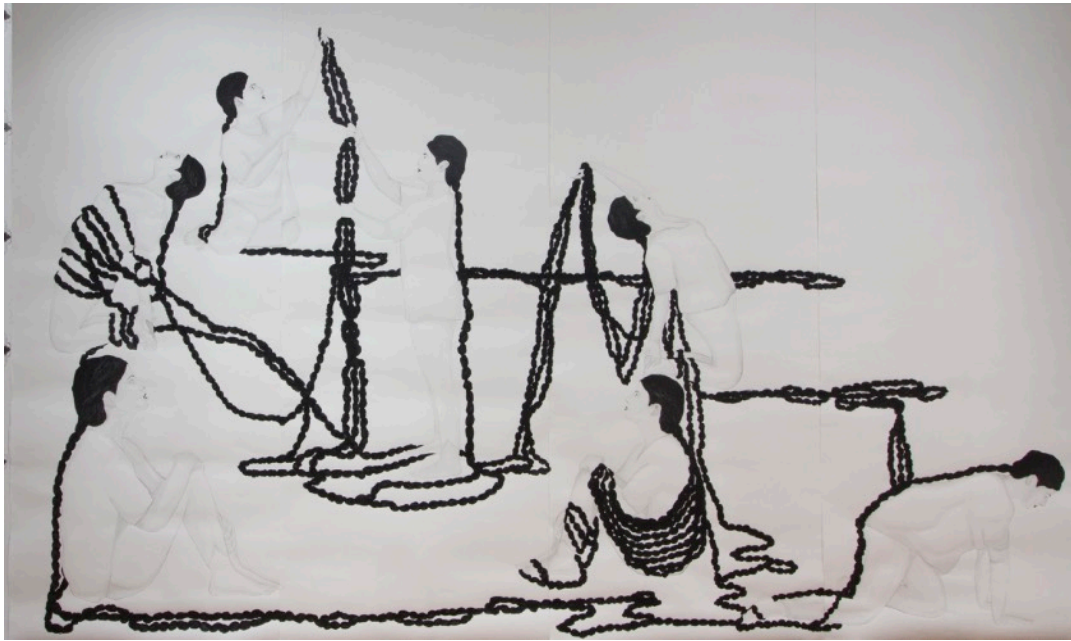
Figure 3



**Installation view - Center view**

Figure 4





Wall Drawing

Figure 5



Wall Drawing- Detail shot

Figure 6



**Separator- Detail shot**

Figure 7



**Separator- Detail shot**

Figure 8





**Floor Drawing- Detail shot**

Figure 9



**Floor Drawing- Detail shot**

Figure 10

